

PRESS RELEASE

Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

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CONYERS SUPPORTS LAWSUIT CHALLENGING CONSTITUTIONALITY OF THE PATRIOT ACT

Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee, issued the following statement supporting the lawsuit brought today by six community organizations challenging the constitutionality of section 215 of the PATRIOT Act, which permits the government to subpoena library, book, and other business records by administrative fiat without showing probable cause:

“In the nearly two years since the horrific events of September 11, the Bush Administration has been using the USA PATRIOT Act to surreptitiously obtain our personal, private records and belongings and trample our constitutionally protected rights.

“It’s not just John Conyers or the ACLU saying this – there are a growing number of Republican, independent, and non-partisan voices telling the Attorney General that he needs to reconsider the tactics being used to fight the war on terrorism. The USA PATRIOT Act has not only failed to make our nation safer, but it has instead been used to pry into the daily lives of ordinary Americans.

“Section 215 is a direct attack on the First Amendment, which protects our right to free speech. Libraries and bookstores say this law has caused people to “self censor” their reading materials, such that they are not reading books they would otherwise normally borrow or purchase. Clearly, this has no place in a free society.

It is important to remember that this is the same Department of Justice who’s own Inspector General recently reported had engaged in a “pattern of physical and verbal abuse” against the hundreds of immigration detainees rounded up after September 11. They were held in lock downs 23 hours a day with lights constantly on in their cells. Some were thrown against the wall naked and subjected to such verbal taunts as “you’re going to die here,” and “you will feel pain.” All were given very limited right to counsel and were presumed guilty unless proven innocent. This is the same Department of Justice that is now using Section 215 to target innocent people, not terrorists.

And it’s the same Justice Department that tried to unilaterally shut down immigration proceedings. This led Judge Damon Keith of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals to write that by unilaterally shutting down immigration proceedings, the Administration was “seeking to uproot people’s lives outside the public eye, and behind a closed door. Democracies die behind closed doors.”

“Many of us remember a time when the powers of the FBI and the CIA were horribly abused. Many of us know what it means to face racial profiling and religious persecution. Many of us know that our nation has overreacted to threats of violence in the past by clamping down on legitimate protests.

“When we learn that our government is trampling on our free speech and privacy rights by obtaining our private records, with only a vague assertion that there may be a terrorist connection, it sends a chill up our spines. We all want to fight terrorism, but we want to do it the right way, consistent with our Constitution, and in a manner that serves as a model for the rest of the world.”